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MY LIFE

BY

ELSIE KAHAN

NEE (ELSA GUTFREUND)



Elsie Gutfreund Kahan Saepoff circa 2003)

From Top Left

1 – Engagement: Marie Gelbstein/Aron Gutfreund (Antwerp, Belgium 1935)

2 – Wedding Picture: Marie Gelbstein and Aron Gutfreund (Antwerp 1936)

3 – Elsa and Marie (1940)

4 – Elsa (1941)

5 – Elsa and Aron on ship to Cuba (1942)

6 – Elsa Gutfreund in Cuba (1943)



"MY LIFE"

I was born in Antwerp, Belgium on September 4, 1937. My father was born in Nowy Sanz, Poland. There were 6 brothers and sisters in his family. My grandfather owned a shop of workman's clothes. My grandmother I'm sure was a homemaker. They were very orthodox. They owned their own home but I'm sure they didn't have much money and weren't considered wealthy.

My father's uncle came to Poland and convinced my grandfather to start sending his boys to Antwerp to study the diamond business. My uncle being the oldest was the first to go. After one year in Antwerp he sent for my father the next oldest son. They both studied to be diamond cutters and cleavers. When they were ready to send for the next brother it was too late. Poland had been invaded by the nazis it was then September 1939.

My mother was born in Fataciesti, Transylvania which I believe is Hungary. Her father, my grandfather also went to Antwerp to go into the diamond profession. They had four girls and one boy. My grandfather died during an operation and never lived to see the horror of the war and see his family die which was a blessing for him. When my grandfather died my grandmother was left with five children to feed and not much money so she opened her home and fed lunch to the men who were unmarried in the diamond business. My father met my mother that way, she was the oldest of the girls and thirteen at the time and he was willing to wait till she turned sixteen to marry her. They were married on December 4, 1936 and I was born exactly nine months later to the day. My uncle Moki was also very attracted to my mother's sister Rela and I think he fell in love with her then. He was fifteen years older and my grandmother thought he was too old for her. My aunt Rela later married and had a child named Max.

At this time the German army was advancing all over Europe. My maternal grandmother thought the men would be safer in the south of France (Vichy France), so my father and his brother and my mother's brother went to Marseilles, France. My mother being very young and idealistic decided later that she was going to join the French Resistance and left me with my grandmother and went to France. When my father and my uncles arrived in France the Vichy government put them in camps depending what country they came from. My father and uncle went to a Polish camp and my other uncle went to a Hungarian camp. The Germans were in France already and things were very bad. The Vichy government kept tabs on you constantly, you always had to carry identification papers.

My mother working for the resistance I know saved many lives. Whenever I went to Belgium I heard from quite a few people all the things that she did during the war. The people she saved taking them to Switzerland and even to Spain. She came back to Belgium and took my Aunt Rela with her husband and child who was then about three years old to Switzerland where she lived during the war in a DP camp. My mother never wanted to stay there because she always said that she wanted to be free and not live locked up in a camp. The war was really progressing and getting worse and my mother came back again to Belgium and this time she was coming for me and also for her mother and two sisters. My mother working for the resistance always traveled with false papers, wore a cross and pretended not to be Jewish. She got to Belgium and begged her mother to leave with her and she would take them all to Switzerland, me she was taking to France to my father. My grandmother refused to go saying that nothing would happen to them in Belgium so she stayed. I must have been about three years old at the time. We traveled by train from Belgium to France then by foot and I'm not sure how she got us to the south of France. I don't remember any of this, my uncle Moki told everything that I know about my life during the war.

Unfortunately by my grandmother refusing to leave with her children she didn't realize it would be their death sentence. As it turned out they were deported to Auschwitz on September 26, 1942 and were killed September 29, 1942. The way I know the exact date is I have a letter from the Red Cross Tracing Service informing me of this information.

When we got to France neither my mother nor father could keep me where they lived. My father's camp wouldn't allow any females it was only for males. My mother was constantly on the move working for the French resistance. I was put in a home with a catholic family and lived there as a hidden child. My father paid them for my upkeep and to be quiet about it. My father would pick me up for the day and we would go

to this big square almost like a park. My uncle told me that since there was such a shortage of food my father never knew if I was being fed well by these people I was living with so he would pick up an egg at the black market which he paid one dollar for, punch a hole in it and make me suck it out.

At this time it was already 1942 and a pretty dangerous time for Jews to still be in Europe. My father and uncle knew it was time to get out as soon as they could. Fortunately for them they had the money they put away from the diamond business. My father was also a goldsmith. My father got our papers called "Safe Conduct Papers" for three of us my mother father and me. My father didn't know how to find my mother. No one was sure where she was. My uncle also made his arrangements. I remember my uncle telling me that I was sick with a bad cold and they wouldn't let me get on the ship, twice we were refused, the third time we were able to get on. My father and uncle took me from the home that I was staying at in France without telling them anything. My father had been paying this family money for taking care of me so he didn't want them to know that we were leaving. I know that he was afraid they would notify the authorities. We boarded the ship my father, my uncle and I. This ship was one of the last to leave Marseille, France it went to Casablanca than to Cuba. My father found out later that my mother was caught and deported to Auschwitz where she was killed.

She was about 23 years old when she died and I don't know her date of death even though I have tried to find out over these past 35 years or so. Because of her involvement with the resistance movement she went under an assumed name which I don't know. I'm hoping that now that the German Government has released new lists that I will be able to find out more about her date of death. I always light a memorial candle for her on her birthday which was February 12, 1920 and also on Yom Kippur which is traditional for holocaust victims for which we have no date of deaths. I have always regretted not knowing my mother since she must have been the most unselfish human being to sacrifice herself like that and at such a young age. I'm sure she just never thought anything would happen to her. When you're young you're very idealistic.

We lived in Cuba for four years, my father remarried there and the woman he married also came from Poland. She was an American citizen and was there for a visit. We arrived in the United States in 1946 and settled in Manhattan. I grew up in Washington Heights. My uncle Moki was in Cuba with us also along with most of my cousins. They all tried to make a match for my uncle in Cuba but it never happened, he was always in love with my aunt Rela. When we came to the States my uncle went back to Belgium to continue his life that he had before the war. He found out that my aunt Rela was divorced and was working at a furrier shop but didn't know which one though he knew it was in Brussels. He went to every store in Brussels and by the end of the day he walked into one shop and Rela looked up and saw Moki and the rest is history. He married my aunt brought up her son Max and they had two more children a boy Jackie and a girl Mireille. As it turns out my aunt died at 62 of pancreatic cancer and my wonderful uncle who was like a father to me died at 82, so in the end they were together after all.

My father died at the age of 67 way too young for someone that lived through so much tragedy. We were very close. I married at 20 and had three wonderful girls. Karen, Laurie and Marci. I was married for almost 31 years and my husband died of Pancreatic cancer. After fourteen years of being a widow I have recently remarried.

Elsie Kahan Saepoff

Nee- Elsa Gutfreund